

# New York City Opera threatened by economic crisis

By Fred Mazelis  
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New York, the cultural capital of the United States, is the only American city with two major opera companies. The Metropolitan Opera is world-renowned, offering well over 200 performances of more than two-dozen individual operas each year. The New York City Opera, nevertheless, is also one of the half-dozen most prominent opera companies in the country, with its own notable 65-year history.

Founded in 1943, the City Opera was often called the “people’s opera” as a way of differentiating it from the wealthier and more exclusive Met, which first opened its doors in 1880. The NYCO was known, especially in its early days, for its cheaper tickets and for programming and commissioning the work of American composers. It highlighted operas sung in English, a broader repertory, and the work of American singers. This emphasis was not primarily an expression of American nationalism, but rather an effort to bring opera to a wider audience without sacrificing artistic and musical standards.

Stephen Sondheim’s work was presented at the City Opera, as well as Gilbert and Sullivan. American operas that found a place in the repertory after first being produced by the NYCO included Douglas Moore’s *The Ballad of Baby Doe* and Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah*. The City Opera also brought Leonard Bernstein’s masterpiece *Candide* into the opera house after its appearance on Broadway. It was the City Opera that pioneered the revival of Baroque opera, and especially the work of George Frideric Handel. Other operas that were long neglected, like Erich Korngold’s *Die Tote Stadt*, found audiences at the City Opera.

Today, however, this prominent company finds its future increasingly in doubt. For the fiscal year that ended in mid-2008, revenues fell sharply, by 23 percent, to \$32.9 million. With expenditures of \$44.2 million, the opera’s deficit for that one year alone amounts to \$11.3 million. It has turned to its endowment to meet shortfalls, with the endowment falling as a result from \$57 to \$16 million over the past five years.

The City Opera crisis says a lot about the current state of so-called “high” culture, those sections of the performing arts that are not always or even mostly profitable, even with high ticket prices.

Like all nonprofit cultural institutions, the NYCO is heavily

dependent on the financial support of its wealthy patrons, including those who sit on its board and are expected to donate generously, and also raise large sums from business associates and others. All of these institutions have been significantly affected by the financial crisis, which has wiped out some fortunes and generally induced wealthy supporters to scale back the size of their donations.

The Metropolitan Opera is facing similar problems, and anonymous sources told the media several months ago of an annual deficit that might reach as high as \$40 million. This compares to an annual budget approaching 10 times that of the City Opera, however, and the Met’s endowment is still about \$200 million.

For the NYCO, the financial problems have been aggravated by a number of other factors. First, the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center, its home for more than 40 years (it has since been renamed for David H. Koch, the oil and gas billionaire who donated \$100 million to a fund shared by the NYCO and the New York City Ballet), has been closed for renovation. The City Opera was essentially forced to cancel its entire 2008-2009 season.

Second, the newly hired music director of the NYCO, the Belgian director Gerard Mortier, whose reputation as an iconoclast was supposed to reinvigorate the company, resigned in November 2008, even before the beginning of his term, when he found that the \$60 million budget he says he was promised had been cut to \$36 million. Mortier’s abrupt departure generated unfavorable publicity and uncertainty about the opera’s future artistic leadership. This was at least partly eased by the announcement in early 2009 that George Steel would become music director. Steel is well known in New York for his tenure at Columbia University’s Miller Theater, but he has almost no opera experience.

The announcements of Mortier’s departure and Steel’s appointment coincided almost exactly with the shock of the financial meltdown. The mood among the moneybags who back the City Opera was and remains a gloomy one. These patrons may be music lovers, but their own bottom line is all-important, especially in today’s perilous times, and the whole layer of financial backers is in no mood to hear about the special and, to some, unnecessary problems of the NYCO.

This was the context in which recriminations began behind the scenes, and some of these have now begun to be aired in public.

A lengthy feature in the *New York Times* a few weeks ago was headlined, “Beleaguered City Opera Tries to Hold Off the Ultimate Finale.” The article quoted several cultural administrators to the effect that City Opera was on its deathbed, and perhaps deserved to be buried.

Robert W. Wilson, a former City Opera chairman who now is a member of the board at the rival Metropolitan, told the *Times*, “There is a slight chance that they can remain open, but where would the money come from?”

Kate Levin, New York’s cultural affairs commissioner and the Bloomberg administration’s main spokesman in this area, added her assessment. “This is an organization whose resources have been stretched for a long period of time...as the organization grew in ways that have proved not to be fully sustainable over the long term.”

One day after this lengthy feature in the *Times*, the editors followed with their own pronouncement. It is not often that an editorial is given over to the subject of the future of one of the city’s cultural organizations, but the *Times* saw fit to underline what it sees as the lessons of the present situation.

“We have always admired the City Opera’s artistic brio,” the newspaper commented. “It’s going to take a lot of business brio to keep going: a commitment to living within its modest means, a return to the spirit of its modest origins as the ‘people’s opera,’ and, especially, a clearer kind of thinking—artistic and managerial—than we’ve seen in recent years.”

There is more than a bit of hypocrisy and sanctimony in this advice. With a deficit of about \$11 million, the NYCO is not in the same league as the city’s banking institutions that have lined up for hundreds and hundreds of billions of dollars in taxpayer bailouts to rescue a tiny layer of fabulously wealthy parasites.

Susan Baker, the chairwoman of the City Opera, is a former investment banker at Goldman Sachs, and whatever disagreements may exist about her record, she certainly hasn’t done anything very different from her counterparts elsewhere. If she is being publicly scolded today, there must be some other reasons.

There is undoubtedly an element of panicky competition for dwindling financial support from Wall Street involved. More important, though is the signal that the city’s corporate and political establishment seeks to send to the opera-going public and to the city’s working population itself: culture will be less available and less affordable, and experimentation and creativity will be discouraged. Above all, in case anyone has any illusions, culture must “pay its own way.” Rather than considering the way the arts are financed under the present system, the ruling elite and its spokesmen would like us to focus on the alleged mismanagement of Ms. Baker.

The crisis also means more brutal concessions from workers at the City Opera and other cultural institutions. The American Federation of Musicians Local 802 has already meekly accepted a drastic cutback in guaranteed annual weeks of work for the opera’s orchestra union, from 29 to 22. The company is looking for similar cuts from the opera’s singers, represented by the American Guild of Musical Artists.

If there is money for the banks, but not for homeowners facing foreclosure or workers thrown on the scrap heap, there is also no money for the “people’s opera.” It goes without saying that in all the words written on the crisis of the City Opera, the term “subsidy” makes no appearance.

A tiny handful of the super-rich and their tested representatives makes the decisions on the allocation of society’s resources. They already control all the levers of economic and political power, and the decisions on cultural life flow from this state of affairs. When times are flush, the grotesque excesses of the new Gilded Age, the renaming of buildings and the colossal squandering of resources, are explained away as perhaps the price that must be paid for the allegedly wonderful freedom and creativity that is “guaranteed” by the profit system. Now the crisis exposes the real state of affairs. Capitalism is incompatible with genuine democracy. Every sphere of life is subject to the ruthless dictatorship of the “masters of the universe.”

Democracy in the sphere of culture does not mean, of course, that operatic programming will be decided by popular vote. It means that society as a whole must exercise control, with full recognition of the creative autonomy of the artists, composers and performers. The defense and expansion of culture, and bringing it to ever-wider sections of the population, is only possible as part of the socialist transformation of society, in which productive and technical resources are allocated to meet all human needs.

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